

# Rules of the Game

## All About Initiative (Part One)

By Skip Williams



**Player characters** in the **D&D** game often go looking for trouble and, more often than not, they find it. When trouble arises, combat is sure to follow. The action during a **round** of battle in the **D&D** game takes place more or less simultaneously; however, resolving everyone's activities at the same time isn't too practical, so everybody must take turns. That's where **initiative** comes in.

Initiative doesn't pose too many difficulties for players and **DMs**. Nevertheless, situations often arise that can make even something as simple as initiative seem hopelessly confusing. These series examines those times when the action in a **D&D** campaign makes the initiative rules break down.

### Initiative Basics

A complete tour of the initiative rules requires several stops. Pages 136-137 in the *Player's Handbook* cover initiative fundamentals. The descriptions of special initiative actions, which begin on page 160 in the *Player's Handbook*, add considerable depth and complexity to the initiative rules. The rules for starting and running an encounter on pages 22-24 in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* include additional information on initiative. A look at the introduction to **D&D** combat on page 133 in the *Player's Handbook* and the general information on acting during combat on page 138 also would prove helpful in understanding initiative.

#### From the page 136-137 of the *Player's Handbook*:

##### Initiative

Every round, each combatant gets to do something. The combatants' initiative checks, from highest to lowest, determine the order in which they act.

**Initiative Checks:** At the start of a battle, each combatant makes an initiative check. An initiative check is a Dexterity check. Each character applies his or her Dexterity modifier to the roll. The DM finds out what order characters are acting in, counting down from highest result to lowest, and each character acts in turn. In every round that follows, the characters act in the same order (unless a character takes an action that results in his or her initiative changing; see Special Initiative Actions, page 160). Usually, the DM writes the names of the characters down in initiative order so that on subsequent rounds he can move quickly from one character to the next. If two or more combatants have the same initiative check result, the combatants who are tied act in order of total initiative modifier (highest first). If there is still a tie, the tied characters should roll again to determine which one of them goes before the other.

**Monster Initiative:** Typically, the DM makes a single initiative check for monsters and other opponents. That way, each player gets a turn each round and the DM also gets one turn. At the DM's option, however, he can make separate initiative checks for different groups of monsters or even for individual

creatures. For instance, the DM may make one initiative check for an evil cleric of Nerull and another check for all seven of her zombie guards.

**Flat-Footed:** At the start of a battle, before you have had a chance to act (specifically, before your first regular turn in the initiative order), you are flat-footed. You can't use your Dexterity bonus to AC (if any) while flat-footed. (This fact can be very bad for you if you're attacked by rogues.) Barbarians and rogues have the uncanny dodge extraordinary ability, which allows them to avoid losing their Dexterity bonus to AC due to being flat-footed. A flat-footed character can't make attacks of opportunity.

**Inaction:** Even if you can't take actions (for instance, if you become paralyzed or unconscious), you retain your initiative score for the duration of the encounter. For example, when paralyzed by a ghoul, you may miss one or more actions, but once the cleric casts *remove paralysis* on you, you may act again on your next turn.

## Surprise

When a combat starts, if you are not aware of your opponents and they are aware of you, you're surprised.

## Determining Awareness

Sometimes all the combatants on a side are aware of their opponents, sometimes none are, and sometimes only some of them are. Sometimes a few combatants on each side are aware and the other combatants on each side are unaware.

The DM determines who is aware of whom at the start of a battle. He may call for Listen checks, Spot checks, or other checks to see how aware the adventurers are of their opponents.

**The Surprise Round:** If some but not all of the combatants are aware of their opponents, a surprise round happens before regular rounds begin. Any combatants aware of the opponents can act in the surprise round, so they roll for initiative. In initiative order (highest to lowest), combatants who started the battle aware of their opponents each take a standard action during the surprise round (see Standard Actions, page 139). You can also take free actions during the surprise round, at the DM's discretion. If no one or everyone is surprised, no surprise round occurs.

**Unaware Combatants:** Combatants who are unaware at the start of battle don't get to act in the surprise round. Unaware combatants are flat-footed because they have not acted yet, so they lose any Dexterity bonus to AC.

Here's an overview of the initiative rules and some key concepts relating to initiative:

- Combat in the **D&D** game takes place in rounds 6 seconds long.

The initiative rules exist to make sure that everyone involved in a battle gets a chance to act once during each round of combat. A round remains 6 seconds long no matter how many combatants become involved in a battle. This is possible because, as noted earlier, everyone who acts in a round is assumed to act more or less

simultaneously.

- **Initiative checks** determine the order in which combatants' actions are resolved during a round. Once the **DM** establishes an initiative order for a battle, there's very little that can change it.

As noted on page 136 in the *Player's Handbook*, an initiative check is a **Dexterity** check. Few other things can affect an initiative check. Feats such as Improved Initiative can improve your initiative **bonus**. Any improvement or impairment to your Dexterity score that is in effect when the battle begins affects your initiative for that battle. If your Dexterity score changes during the battle, your initiative result doesn't change. For example, if you receive a *cat's grace* spell before a battle begins, you get the benefit of the improvement to your Dexterity score when you make your initiative check for that battle. If a foe dispels your *cat's grace* spell after the battle begins, your Dexterity score decreases appropriately, but your initiative number doesn't change as the result of the decrease.

The initiative order in a battle isn't completely set in stone, however. The ready and delay actions both have the potential to change a combatant's place in the order (and they usually do). Part Three considers these actions in more detail.

As noted earlier, one pass through the initiative order constitutes one 6-second round. One could say that a round of combat begins just before the combatant with the highest initiative number acts and ends just after the combatant with the lowest initiative number acts.

Despite the foregoing, remember that the term "round" can be relative. It can refer to one complete initiative cycle, or it can refer to the period of time between one combatant's turn and that combatant's next turn.

**From the page 138 of the *Player's Handbook*:**

Each round represents 6 seconds in the game world. At the table, a round presents an opportunity for each character involved in a combat situation to take an action. Anything a person could reasonably do in 6 seconds, your character can do in 1 round.

Each round's activity begins with the character with the highest initiative result and then proceeds, in order, from there. Each round of a combat uses the same initiative order. When a character's turn comes up in the initiative sequence, that character performs his entire round's worth of actions. (For exceptions, see Attacks of Opportunity, page 137, and Special Initiative Actions, page 160.)

- Combatants make initiative checks when the DM decides that an encounter has begun or has the potential to begin.

The rules leave identifying an encounter's start to the DM's good judgment. As a rule of thumb, however, an encounter begins when two groups are close enough to each other to perceive each other and at least one of the two groups has done so. As we shall see in Part Two, it is sometimes best to call for initiative when a group's meeting is merely imminent, such as when a party opens a door in an unexplored dungeon. In any case, it's usually best to call for initiative checks whenever you find that establishing an initiative order might prove helpful. For example, establishing an initiative order could prove useful during an encounter in which several different **creatures** are trying to deal with a series of traps or negotiations with several different creatures.

- A group (or a single **character**) can **surprise** a potential foe by noticing that foe before the foe can notice them.

When one group surprises another, a surprise round ensues. During a surprise round, the character or group that has achieved surprise can take one **standard action**. Creatures that have been surprised cannot act during a surprise round.

At times, some creatures in a group will notice a foe when the others do not. In such cases, an encounter still begins with a surprise round, but everyone who has noticed the other group gets to act during the surprise round, though the acting creatures still are limited to one standard action each.

- Combatants remain in initiative order until the DM decides that it is no longer necessary. Releasing characters from the initiative order usually marks an encounter's end.

It's usually a good idea to keep characters in initiative order until all danger to them (at least from the current encounter) is past. Players might pick up on this, so sometimes you may want to keep using an initiative order for a little longer than strictly necessary just to maintain a sense of danger and tension in the game. Once a party has dealt with the challenges and obstacles an encounter offers, however, you'll probably find that maintaining an initiative order slows things down. For example, after the party defeats a group of monsters in an encounter they'll probably want to distribute some healing magic among the player characters, loot their defeated foes, and look for treasure. It's usually best to simply allow the players to handle those tasks outside of the initiative order.

Sometimes, it's not entirely clear just when actions in initiative should stop. We'll consider some of those situations in Part Three.

- All combatants roll once for initiative when the DM decides an encounter has begun.

The rules don't allow you to "take 20" or even "take 10" on an initiative check. Your initiative check result initially represents your character's ability to react when an encounter begins. (That's why characters are **flat-footed** until they take an action in an encounter's first round.) You have only one chance for an initial reaction to an encounter, and the rules don't allow you to prepare yourself for an encounter when you don't know it's coming.

If you're fortunate enough to notice potential foes before they notice you, you achieve surprise over your foe, which is a great advantage for you. See page 137 in the *Player's Handbook*. Even so, if your foe survives your initial action, you could lose your advantage. That's why you and your foe must make initiative checks after a surprise round.

## Managing Initiative

The rules make one very valuable suggestion for any DM trying to handle combat smoothly and efficiently: Write down the initiative order. Many DMs I know keep a pad of paper or a small dry erase board for jotting down initiative. This is a great idea, especially if you can prop up your writing surface when you're done -- if you do so, everyone can see the initiative order and will know when their turns come. I use a particularly large vinyl mat (marked in 1-inch squares) to regulate combat and I jot the initiative right on the mat.

I also use another trick. When preparing for a game, I jot down the game statistics for everything the PCs will

meet onto index cards. I also have each player record key information about their characters (**ability scores**, **Armor Class**, **base attack** and **grapple** bonuses, **saving throw** bonuses, and key skill scores) on index cards as well. When an encounter starts, I place all the cards into initiative order. When someone delays or readies an action, I can remove the appropriate card from the order and place it back in the correct place when the combatant finally acts. If I happen to drop or somehow scramble the cards, I can easily reset the cards by referring to the written initiative order, and the players also have the written order for reference.

I find this method well worth the effort it entails. One of the biggest advantages of the **D&D** game's initiative system is its potential to speed up combat, and the combination of cards and a written initiative can make things speedy indeed.

## What's Next?

That's all the time we have this week. Next week, we'll consider the fine art of deciding just when an encounter begins.

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## About the Author

**Skip Williams** keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of ***Dragon Magazine*** for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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